Abundant rain benefits

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Resurgent water levels result in newly flooded vegetation, which is great for shoreline anglers young and old. SCOTT KEEPFER/STAFF

Thanks to heavy, near-daily rainfall during the past couple of weeks, Upstate lakes are at or above their highest level in years, and this full-pool phenomenon has many positive repercussions for fish and fishermen.

"It has been a really good thing," said Dan Rankin, Upstate fisheries biologist for the S.C. Department of Natural Resources. "Obviously fish have a bigger volume of habitat."

Many fish species that typically have retreated to deeper, cooler water by this point in the summer have remained in shallow water, kept there by milder-than-normal temperatures and the enticement of new shallow-water lairs in which to feed and reside.

"(Lake) Hartwell has been down for a year or two, and when it's down for an extended period you begin to get (plant) growth in the areas that have been exposed," Rankin said.

When the lake level rises, the new-growth vegetation becomes part of the sub-surface world.

"That not only provides great cover for fish but also fuels the food chain because you've got decomposition and you're adding nutrients to the system," Rankin said.

"Every time you see this, there are pulses of productivity that fuel the system. As a result we'll usually see a really good class of bass and crappie associated with the lake coming back up."

But bass and crappie are far from the only species to benefit from the recharge.

fishermen

"Forage fish populations are going to be more productive with the new surge of nutrients coming into the system," Rankin said. "Filter feeders such as blueback herring will thrive. More primary productivity translates into healthier sport and game fish."

And that's good news for anglers, whether they're pursuing largemouth bass, striped bass, crappie, bream or catfish.

Nutrient input is important, particularly in the Savannah River lakes, where the nutrient level is considerably less than other lake and river systems across the state. And nutrients aren't coming only from the newly submerged vegetation but from runoff as well.

"Heavy rainfall means a lot more runoff from the watershed and a lot more nutrients funneled into the system," Rankin said.

The bottom line: Enjoy it while it lasts.

"I'd love to see us not have to deal with droughts," Rankin said, laughing. "But it's great to have the lakes back up and full. The fish like it, for sure."